DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 255 CG 015 861

AUTHOR Barnett, Rosalind C.; Baruch, Grace K.
TITLE On the Psychological Well-Being of Women in the Mid Years.
SPONS AGENCY National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.; Time, Inc., New York, N.Y.; Wellesley Coll., Mass. Center for Research on Women.
PUB DATE Nov 81
GRANT BRSG-RR-07186-02; NSF-BNS-77-26756
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Scientific Gerontological Society (34th) and the Scientific & Educational Canadian Association on Gerontology (10th), (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 8-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Development; Adults; Aging (Individuals); Chronological Age; Employed Women; *Females; Marital Status; *Mental Health; *Midlife Transitions; Quality of Life; *Role Conflict; *Well Being
IDENTIFIERS *Menopause; *Parity

ABSTRACT

Conceptualization of the lives of adult women and the forces affecting their well-being have concentrated on five constructs: (1) chronological age; (2) menopause and the empty nest; (3) marital status; (4) parity; and (5) multiple role involvement as a source of stress. A re-examination of these variables focused on the concerns and gratifications experienced by women in various domains of life and their relationships to family status, employment status, age, and sense of well-being. A disproportionate random sample (N=238) of women aged 35-55, who were never married, married with children, married without children, or divorced with children, were interviewed using a structured survey instrument developed empirically on the basis of first-stage interviews with approximately 72 women. Results showed that women in the middle years scored high on all well-being indices. Eight indices of well-being included in the survey protocol were subjected to further analysis; two factors, mastery and pleasure, emerged. The findings indicated non-significant and/or weak relationships between these well-being factors and the five constructs. The results question the utility of these constructs that are often cited as critical to understanding psychological well-being among women in the middle years. (Author/NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED215255

On the Psychological Well-Being of [1] Women in the Mid Years

Rosalind C. Barnett, Ph.D.
Brandeis University
Waltham, MA

Grace K. Baruch, Ph.D.
Brandeis University
Waltham, MA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rosalind C. Barnett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 015861

[1]This research was supported by NSF Grant #BNS 77-26756. Additional funding was provided by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (BRSG #RR07186-02 and Time-Life Funds)

The authors express their appreciation to Ralph Turner, David Connell and Kenneth Jones for assistance in data analysis and wish to thank a dedicated team of interviewers, coordinated by Marion Meenan.

Correspondence should be addressed to Rosalind C. Barnett, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181

617-235-0320 X2500

Precis

An interview study of a non-clinical population of adult women, 35 to 55, was conducted in order to define psychological well-being empirically and to examine its relation to the following theoretically crucial constructs: (a) chronological age; (b) menopause and the empty nest; (c) marital status; (d) parity; and (e) multiple role involvement. A disproportionate, random sample (N = 238) was designed to include women from four family statuses—never-married; married with children; married without children; and divorced with children. All never-married and divorced women were employed, as were approximately half of the married women.

Eight indices of well-being included in the survey protocol were submitted to a varimax rotated factor analysis. Two factors labelled, mastery and pleasure, emerged. Zero-order correlations indicated non-significant and/or weak relationships between these well-being factors and the five constructs.

Studies reporting changes in the psychological well-being of adult women have received wide attention (1, 2, 3). Compared to findings from surveys conducted in the 1950's (4), recent research indicates that mature women report feeling better about themselves, and that depression is a less frequent complaint. The implication of these findings is not yet well understood by practitioners, perhaps in part because they have not been linked to any theory. Moreover, theory about adult development is weak and based largely on small-scale non-random samples of male subjects (5, 6, 7).

In a 1978 review of research and theory concerning women in the middle years, we stated that "particularly with respect to women, theoretical work is in its infancy and empirical findings tend to be scattered and noncumulative" (8). Little has changed since then. Indeed, concepts and findings presented in early pioneering research on men in the middle years that should have been taken as hypotheses to be tested about women, have instead taken on the status of scientific fact. For example, the notion of a midlife crisis that is tied to chronological age and that afflicts all human beings, women as well as men, has received much attention from the media and has permeated the thinking of many clinicians. Yet disproportionately little attention has been given to a major empirical study by Pearlin and his colleagues (9, 10) that found no evidence for crises associated

with midlife, nor indeed with any particular chronological age. Such negative findings consistently tend to be neglected.

With respect to the study of women, their absence from initial theory-building studies, in combination with stereotypic views of their nature and role, has resulted in overconcentration on certain variables and neglect of others. Conceptualization of the lives of adult women and the forces affecting their well-being have tended to focus on the following as critical variables: (a) chronological age; (b) menopause and the empty nest; (c) marital status; (d) parity; and (e) multiple role involvement as a source of strain. Chronological age derives its importance from stage and crisis theories (11), and is in turn linked to a focus on biological events related to reproductive functioning, particularly menopause and the empty nest. These are thought to trigger crises and symptomatology in women because of the centrality of reproduction to their lives. For similar reasons, whether a woman is married and whether she has children are viewed as important determinants of her psychological well-being. Finally, given a view of the wife and mother role as primary, involvement in paid work is seen as an additional role, with consequent strain and conflict. Thus a focus on the potential harm of multiple role involvement, rather than on the potential benefits of employment and of role combinations, has shaped approaches to the study of women's well-being.

This paper re-examines these views by presenting data from a

two-stage study of women 35 to 55. The focus of the study was on the concerns and gratifications women experience in various domains of life and on how these are related to: (a) their family status, employment status, and age; and (b) their sense of well-being. The sample, shown in Figure 1, was composed of women who occupied one of four family-status groups (never-married,

---

Insert Figure 1 about here

---

married without children, married with children, and divorced with children). All never-married and divorced women were employed; each group of married women was divided between employed and not employed. As is shown in Figure 1, six role pattern groups were thus formed. Employed women were selected equally among those in high-, medium-, and low-prestige occupations (12); non-employed women were selected similarly according to the prestige of their husbands' occupations. In order to be classified as employed, a woman had to be working at least 17-1/2 hours a week for at least three months prior to being interviewed. Divorced women had to have been divorced for at least a year prior to being interviewed. The design thus yields subsamples of women who occupy one, two or three of the major roles: wife, mother, paid worker.

Method

The study was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of intensive semi-structured interviews lasting three to six hours with a convenience sample of approximately twelve women in each of the 6 cells shown in Figure 1.[1] In the second stage,[1] a disproportionate random sample of forty-five women per cell was drawn from a town in the greater Boston area; the response rate was 76%. All subjects were Caucasians; findings therefore cannot be generalized to minority women. The subjects in the random sample were interviewed using a structured survey instrument that was developed empirically on the basis of the first-stage interviews.

Development of the Survey Instrument

The major concept guiding our study was that women function in various domains of life, e.g., work, marriage, children, and that psychological well-being is affected by the balance between positive aspects (rewards) and negative aspects (concerns) within each of these domains. Accordingly, in the first-phase interviews, we inquired through open-ended questions about the rewarding and distressing aspects of each relevant domain.

Taped transcripts of these interviews were content analyzed to develop scales consisting of equal numbers of "rewards" and "concerns" items for each domain. In the domain of work, each

employed subject was asked, for example, how rewarding (using a 4-point scale from "not at all rewarding" to "extremely rewarding") she found the pay she received and how much of a concern (from "not at all" to "extremely") was the lack of challenge. Each subject received three scores per domain: a reward score, i.e., her mean response to the potentially rewarding aspects of a domain; a concern score; and a balance score, i.e., the difference between the mean reward score and the mean concern score. Income and health were also included as domains affecting well-being. These variables are less complex to assess, however, and did not require the procedures described here.

The Measurement of Psychological Well-Being

As has been widely noted in the research literature, psychological well-being is not a unitary construct (13). Thus multiple indices of well-being were included in the survey on the basis of empirical and/or clinical judgments about their relevance to psychological well-being. The pool of measures consisted of the following: single item indices of general satisfaction, general happiness and optimism; standard scales measuring self-esteem (14) and locus of control (15); our own empirically derived measure of balance (rewards minus concerns) in the domain of the self; and the Hopkins symptom check list (16) included to assess sysmptoms of depression and anxiety.

These indices were subjected to a varimax rotated factor analysis, yielding two major factors labelled mastery and pleasure. The first factor, mastery, accounted for 58% of the variance in the indices as shown in Table 1, while the second

---

Insert Table 1 about here

---

factor, pleasure, accounted for 21%. Women high in sense of mastery have high self-esteem, internal locus of control; a positive balance in the domain of the self and low levels of psychiatric symptomatology. High scores on pleasure reflect a high level of satisfaction and happiness and an optimistic view of one's future.

Results

Patterns of Well-Being in Relation to Family Status and Work Status

A striking finding of our study is that overall, women in the middle years score high on all well-being indices. This finding is in contrast to earlier studies reporting high levels of depression among mid-life women (17, 18) . For example, the

possible range of scores for the depression and anxiety subscales of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist was 1 - 4, with 1 indicating that the respondent was not at all bothered by a particular symptom during the past week and 4 indicating that she was extremely bothered by it. The mean scores for our sample were 1.29 (depression) and 1.22 (anxiety). The sample mean score on the self-esteem measure, where scores could range from a low of 1 to a high of 4, was 3.5. With respect to general satisfaction (a 7-point scale), the mean for the whole sample was 5.2. For general happiness (a 3-point scale), the total sample was 2.2.

A three-way ANOVA (employment status x marital status x parental status) revealed a significant main effect of employment on sense of mastery ($F = 3.23$, $df = 1,225$, $p < .05$). All four groups of employed women (never-married, married without children, married with children, divorced with children) had higher factor scores on mastery than did either of the non-employed groups (married with children and married without children). Thus, the combination of employment and maternity has a positive impact on mastery.

Moreover, among the employed women, occupational prestige was significantly related to mastery scores ($F = 3.90$, $df = 1,179$, $p < .05$). Thus, women in high-prestige occupations had higher mastery scores than did women in low-prestige occupations.

With pleasure as the dependent variable, a three-way ANOVA (employment status x marital status x parental status) yielded a

significant main effect for marital status ($F = 4.52$, $df=1,225$, $p<.05$); married women were higher in pleasure than were their unmarried counterparts. There were no significant interactions.

The Relationship of Well-Being to Mid-Life Constructs

Next we describe the relationships of each well-being factor to the constructs traditionally viewed as crucial to women's well-being in the middle years: (a) chronological age; (b) menopause and the empty nest; (c) marital status; (d) parity; and (e) multiple role involvement. The data are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Chronological age. There was no significant relationship between chronological age and either well-being factor. Treating age as a linear variable, zero-order correlations were computed between age and the two outcome variables of mastery and pleasure. Neither correlation was significant ($r = .09$, n.s.; and $r = -.04$, n.s. with mastery and pleasure, respectively). In addition, the twenty year age range was divided into quartiles and ANOVAS were computed. Again there were no significant relationships. Thus the findings cast doubt on the presence of a "midlife crisis." Moreover, there were no decrements in

well-being related to age in the twenty-year age range encompassed by this study. In sum, chronological age, often assumed to be the major organizing construct for understanding adult development, is not so for these women. Our work is thus consistent with that of Pearlin (5, 10) and others in finding no evidence of age-linked crises. We conclude that for a woman in the middle years, to know her age is to know only that. Age is not a marker and contributes little to our understanding of psychological well-being.

Menopause and the empty nest. Menopausal status was determined by subjects' self-reports. They were asked to indicate whether they were pre-menopausal, menopausal, or post-menopausal. According to our subjects, 64% were pre-menopausal, 18% were currently in the process of menopause, and 14% were post-menopausal. There was no relationship beteween menopausal status and either mastery or pleasure for the sample as a whole. Further, given the notion that menopause is especially traumatic for women who are unmarried and/or childless, it is important to note that when data for these groups were examined separately, once again no such relationships were found. An associated finding concerns the relationship between the empty-nest stage and well-being factor. For purposes of this study, the family life cycle was trichotomized into three stages: (a) at least one child under seven years of age; (b) all children over seven and at least one child under eighteen living at home, and (c) all children out of the home--the empty nest.

Neither well-being factor was related significantly to family life cycle (r = .13, $p < .07$ and r = .07, n.s. with mastery and pleasure, respectively).

Marital status. Zero-order correlations showed no significant relationship between marital status and sense of mastery (r = -.03, n.s.). However, being married was correlated significantly and positively with pleasure (r = .17 $p < .01$), although the percent of variance explained is minimal. It is important to note that marital status refers simply to being in the role of wife; it does not imply anything about the quality of the marriage.

In the open-ended questions of the survey, never-married women reported little distress about their marital status. In response to an open-ended question asking "If you could live your life over, what one thing would you do differently?", only 4 of the 50 women in this category mentioned marriage.

Parity. For the sample as a whole, having children was not significantly related to sense of mastery (r = .04, n.s.); for pleasure the correlation was significant (r = .14, $p < .05$), but extremely weak. There are several possible interpretations of the finding that having children made little impact on well-being. First, subjects were all at least 35 years of age, and the mean age was 43.6. For the childless woman, psychological distress about not having children may have been experienced

earlier. Second, because children can cause intense distress as well as intense pleasure, merely having children can be associated with either. Third, while having children may be crucial for some women's well-being (and those women may tend to have children), it may not be at all crucial for the well-being of other women who choose a life pattern reflecting other priorities. In support of this last interpretation, in response to an open-ended survey question asking, "What one thing would you do differently if you had your life to live over?, only 5 of the 103 childless women mentioned having a child. Further, as described above, for childless women more than other women, there was no relationship between menopausal status and well-being. It seems that the combination of menopause and childlessness is not a devasting one. Indeed, childless women often mentioned spontaneously that the issue of children was settled long before menopause, and, in the words of one such woman, "menopause was a minimal event."

Multiple role involvement. In examining the relationship between involvement in multiple roles and the well-being factors, we used two separate measures: (a) the number of roles a woman occupied; and (b) the degree to which she experienced role strain. Our classification of number of roles considered only the roles of paid worker, mother and wife. For example, never-married women who are workers had one role; non-employed married women with children had two roles; employed married women with children had three roles. To measure role strain we summed the women's

responses to two items, used in prior studies, that ask about: (a) the frequency with which they had to juggle things; and (b) the frequency with which things added up to being too much. These two items were correlated at $r = .61$, $p < .001$.

The relationship between the number of roles a woman occupied and her level of role strain was weak, although statistically significant ($r = .11$, $p < .05$). Number of roles a woman occupied was also related positively but weakly to the indices of well-being ($r = .11$, $p < .05$, with sense of mastery; $r = .17$, $p < .01$ with pleasure). Thus although the number of roles a woman occupies is weakly associated with role strain, it is also associated with psychological well-being. The relationship of role strain to the two psychological well-being factors is negative, but significantly so only for pleasure ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$); strain was essentially uncorrelated with mastery ($r = -.09$, n.s.).

In order to examine how the roles of wife, worker, and mother affect role strain, a three-way ANOVA (marital status, employment status and parity) was performed. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for having children ($F = 3.82$, $df = 1,225$, $p < .05$); effects for marital status and employment were not significant. There was a significant interaction between the role of mother and worker ($F = 4.06$, $df = 1,225$, $p < .05$).

These data suggest that employment, which is typically

assumed to be the sine qua non of stress for women, is not a problematic role in contributing to feelings of conflict and overload, while being a mother is. Employment is seen as a necessity for men's psychological well-being, but has not been so considered for women. Our study suggests that work does indeed provide important intrinsic support for the sense of mastery. The two groups of non-employed women scored lower in mastery than did the four groups of employed women. Data from the intensive first-stage interviews suggests that work, rather than causing additional strain, may in fact legitimize a woman's ability to set limits on what might otherwise be the endless demands of domestic life. As one 40-year-old non-employed mother said:

> I have felt very often that it would be much simpler to have a paid job. Simpler only because it's structured and I would be ready for the contingencies. Because my life isn't structured in that way, I always feel as though I'm juggling.

It also appears that underload, or too few roles can be detrimental to well-being. In the words of a thirty-nine-year old married childless woman: "I have too much time to do the things I don't want to do." While women who are employed may experience pressure in their lives, they experience an even

greater degree of reward; on balance, they prefer to take on the responsibilities of paid work. An employed mother of three said: "It bothers me less that I'm rushed than it would if I had too much time."

Conclusion

The findings of this study cast doubt on the utility of the constructs often cited as critical for understanding psychological well-being among women in the middle years. The major correlate of sense of mastery was employment status, a construct rarely given serious consideration either in theory or in clinical practice, as central to women's psychological well-being. Occupational prestige, even more neglected as a "woman's issue" is also an important determinant of well-being.

The implications for socialization practices and therapy, as well as for research and theory are clear; women need to be encouraged to develop their capacities as fully as possible. In a major recent community survey of psychiatric symptomatology, Frederick W. Ilfeld (17) and his colleagues found that the percentage of women with high levels of symptomatology was twice that of men, with the important exception of women in high-prestige occupations. Only this group of women had symptomatology rates as low as men's. According to Ilfeld, one "very practical" mental health implication of these findings is "encouraging and enabling women to find jobs, especially of higher status."

Non-employed women's struggle for a sense of mastery in part reflects our current social climate. The combination of heightened consciousness about women's roles and the economic pressure on one-income households created by inflation has forced re-thinking among non-employed women about the value and meaning of their life pattern. Their concerns require thoughtful attention to their individual situations; to substitute a new formulaic prescription of "go-to-work" for the traditional one of "have pride in homemaking" would in no way advance therapeutic goals. For some women, it is more viable to build a sense of mastery based upon non-paid acitivities.

As a first step, therapists must question their assumptions about the crucial issues for women at midlife (18) and be more receptive to their patients' own formulations. Second, close attention should routinely be paid to women's work life as a potential source of psychological gain.

Nevertheless, as Koch and other students of scientific progress have pointed out, old ideas are not abandoned on the basis of contradictory evidence, they are only abandoned when better theories are brought on the scene. Thus the central task at hand for researchers and clinicians is to reconceptualize approaches to understanding women in the middle years in order to develop an empirically-based theory of adult development for women.

Footnote

[1] It was not possible in either stage to locate the desired numbers of married, childless, non-employed women. Economic pressures, perhaps combined with ideological changes with respect to women's roles, have apparently made this role pattern extremely rare.

References

1. Bird, C. The best years of a woman's life. Psychology Today, June 1979, pp. 20, 22, 26.
2. Srole, L. & Fischer, A.K. The midtown Manhattan longitudinal study vs. the mental paradice lost doctrine. Archives of General Psychiatry, 1980, 37, 209-221.
3. Dupuy, H.J. Self-representations of general psychological well-being of American adults. Paper presented at annual meeting of American Public Health Association, Los Angeles, 1978.
4. Veroff, J., Douvan, E. & Kulka, R. The Inner American: A self-portrait from 1957 to 1976. New York: Basic Books, 1981.
5. Levinson, D. The seasons of a man's life. New York: Knopf, 1978
6. Valliant, G.E. Adaptations to life. Boston: Little. Brown, 1977.
7. Erikson, E. Identity and the life cycle. Psychological Issues, No. 1, 1959.
8. Barnett, R.C. & Baruch, G.K. Women in the middle years: A critique of research and theory. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 1978, 3, 187-196.
9. Pearlin, L.I. Social differences in the problematic experiences of adulthood. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, 1978.
10. Pearlin, L.I. The life cycle and life strains. In H.M. Blalock, Jr., (Ed.,), Sociological theory and reserach: A critical appraisal. New York: Free Press, 1980.
11. Sheehy, G. Passages: Predictable crises of adult life. New York: Dutton, 1976.
12. Siegel, P.M. Prestige in the American occupational structure. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Chicago, 1971.

13. Campbell, A., Converse, P.E., & Rodgers, W.L. The quality of American life. New York: Russell Sage, 1976.

14. Rosenberg, M. Society and the adolescent self-image. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965.

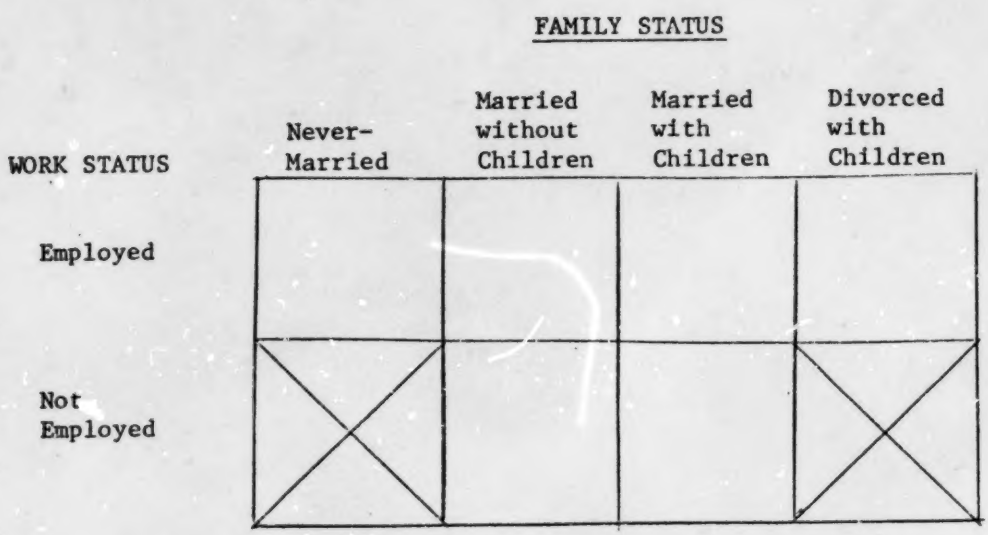
15. Pearlin, L.I. & Schooler, C. The structure of coping. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 1978, 19, 2-21.

16. Derogatis, L.R., Lipman, R.S., Rickels, K., Uhlenhuth, E.H. & Covi, L. The Hopkins symptom checklist. In P. Pichot (Ed.) Psychological measurements in psychopharmacology. Paris: Karger, Basel, 1974.

17. Ilfeld, F. Sex differences in psychiatric symptomatology. Paper presented at meeting of American Psychological Association, San Francisco, 1977.

18. Notman, M. Midlife concerns of women: Implications of the menopause. American Journal of Psychiatry, 1979, 136, 1270-1274.

Figure 1



Subject groups (N = 238)

Table 1

Psychological Well-Being

MASTERY	Loadings	PLEASURE	Loadings
ROSENBERG	.80	GENERAL HAPPINESS	.84
SELF BALANCE	.68	GENERAL SATISFACTION	.65
LOCUS OF CONTROL	.53	OPTIMISM	.42
DEPRESSION	-.74		
ANXIETY	-.60		
% VARIANCE EXPLAINED:	58%		21%

Table 2

Zero-Order Correlations of Well-Being Factors

	MASTERY	PLEASURE
AGE	-.04	.09 ns
MENOPAUSAL STATUS	.03	.03 ns
MARITAL STATUS	-.03	.17^{xx}
CHILDREN	.04	.14^{x}
NUMBER OF ROLES	.11^{x}	.17^{xx}

x = $p < .05$

xx = $p < .01$

xxx = $p < .001$